

2

The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology

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{Woman} became the embodiment of the biological function, the image of nature, the subjugation of which constituted that civilization's title to fame. For millenia men dreamed of acquiring absolute mastery over nature, of converting the cosmos into one immense hunting ground. It was to this that the idea of man was geared in a male-dominated society. This was the significance of reason, his proudest boast.

-- Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*¹

All human beings are natural beings. That may seem like an obvious fact, yet we live in a culture that is founded on the repudiation and domination of nature. This has a special significance for women because, in patriarchal thought, women are believed to be closer to nature than men. This gives women a particular stake in ending the domination of nature—in healing the alienation between human and nonhuman nature. This is also the ultimate goal of the ecology movement, but the ecology movement is not necessarily feminist.

For the most part, ecologists, with their concern for nonhuman nature, have yet to understand that they have a particular stake in ending the domination of women. They do not understand that a central reason for woman's oppression is her association with the despised nature they are so concerned about. The hatred of women and the hatred of nature are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing. Starting with this premise, this article explores why feminism and ecology need each other, and suggests the beginnings of a theory of ecological feminism: ecofeminism.

What Is Ecology?

Ecological science concerns itself with the interrelationships among all forms of life. It aims to harmonize nature, human and nonhuman. It

is an integrative science in an age of fragmentation and specialization. It is also a critical science which grounds and necessitates a critique of our existing society. It is a reconstructive science in that it suggests directions for reconstructing human society in harmony with the natural environment.

Social ecologists are asking how we might survive on the planet and develop systems of food and energy production, architecture, and ways of life that will allow human beings to fulfill our material needs and live in harmony with nonhuman nature. This work has led to a social critique by biologists and to an exploration of biology and ecology by social thinkers. The perspective that self-consciously attempts to integrate both biological and social aspects of the relationship between human beings and their environment is known as *social ecology*. This perspective, developed primarily by Murray Bookchin,² to whom I am indebted for my understanding of social ecology, has embodied the anarchist critique that links domination and hierarchy in human society to the despoilation of nonhuman nature. While this analysis is useful, social ecology without feminism is incomplete.

Feminism grounds this critique of domination by identifying the prototype of other forms of domination: that of man over woman. Potentially, feminism creates a concrete global community of interests among particularly life-oriented people of the world: women. Feminist analysis supplies the theory, program, and process without which the radical potential of social ecology remains blunted. Ecofeminism develops the connections between ecology and feminism that social ecology needs in order to reach its own avowed goal of creating a free and ecological way of life.

What are these connections? Social ecology challenges the dualistic belief that nature and culture are separate and opposed. Ecofeminism finds misogyny at the root of that opposition. Ecofeminist principles are based on the following beliefs:

1. The building of Western industrial civilization in opposition to nature interacts dialectically with and reinforces the subjugation of women, because women are believed to be closer to nature. Therefore, ecofeminists take on the life-struggles of all of nature as our own.
2. Life on earth is an interconnected web, not a hierarchy. There is no natural hierarchy; human hierarchy is projected onto nature and then used to justify social domination. Therefore, ecofeminist theory seeks to show the connections between all forms of domination, including the domination of nonhuman nature, and ecofeminist practice is necessarily antihierarchical.

3. A healthy, balanced ecosystem, including human and nonhuman inhabitants, must maintain diversity. Ecologically, environmental simplification is as significant a problem as environmental pollution. Biological simplification, i.e., the wiping out of whole species, corresponds to reducing human diversity into faceless workers, or to the homogenization of taste and culture through mass consumer markets. Social life and natural life are literally simplified to the inorganic for the convenience of market society. Therefore we need a decentralized global movement that is founded on common interests yet celebrates diversity and opposes all forms of domination and violence. Potentially, ecofeminism is such a movement.

4. The survival of the species necessitates a renewed understanding of our relationship to nature, of our own bodily nature, and of nonhuman nature around us; it necessitates a challenging of the nature-culture dualism and a corresponding radical restructuring of human society according to feminist and ecological principles. Adrienne Rich says, "When we speak of transformation we speak more accurately out of the vision of a process which will leave neither surfaces nor depths unchanged, which enters society at the most essential level of the subjugation of women and nature by men. . . ."³

The ecology movement, in theory and practice, attempts to speak for nature—the "other" that has no voice and is not conceived of subjectively in our civilization. Feminism represents the refusal of the original "other" in patriarchal human society to remain silent or to be the "other" any longer. Its challenge of social domination extends beyond sex to social domination of all kinds, because the domination of sex, race, and class and the domination of nature are mutually reinforcing. Women are the "others" in human society, who have been silent in public and who now speak through the feminist movement.

Women, Nature and Culture: The Ecofeminist Position

In the project of building Western industrial civilization, nature became something to be dominated, overcome, made to serve the needs of men. She was stripped of her magical powers and properties and was reduced to "natural resources" to be exploited by human beings to fulfill human needs and purposes which were defined in opposition to nature (see Merchant, who interprets the scientific revolution as the death of nature, and argues that it had a particularly detrimental effect on women.)⁴ A dualistic Christianity had become ascendant with the

earlier demise of old goddess religions, paganism, and animistic belief systems.⁵ With the disenchantment of nature came the conditions for unchecked scientific exploration and technological exploitation.⁶ We bear the consequences today of beliefs in unlimited control over nature and in science's ability to solve any problem, as nuclear power plants are built without provisions for waste disposal, and satellites are sent into space without provision for retrieval.

In this way, nature became "other," something essentially different from the dominant, to be objectified and subordinated. Women, who are identified with nature, have been similarly objectified and subordinated in patriarchal society. Women and nature, in this sense, are the original "others." Simone de Beauvoir has clarified this connection. For de Beauvoir, "transcendence" is the work of culture, it is the work of men. It is the process of overcoming immanence, a process of culture-building that is based on the increasing domination of nature. It is enterprise. "Immanence," symbolized by women, is that which calls men back, that which reminds man of what he wants to forget. It is his own link to nature that he must forget and overcome to achieve manhood and transcendence:

Man seeks in woman the Other as Nature and as his fellow being. But we know what ambivalent feelings Nature inspires in man. He exploits her, but she crushes him, he is born of her and dies in her; she is the source of his being and the realm that he subjugates to his will; Nature is a vein of gross material in which the soul is imprisoned, and she is the supreme reality; she is contingency and Idea, the finite and the whole; she is what opposes the Spirit, and the Spirit itself. Now ally, now enemy, she appears as the dark chaos from whence life wells up, as this life itself, and as the over-yonder toward which life tends. Woman sums up Nature as Mother, Wife, and Idea; these forms now mingle and now conflict, and each of them wears a double visage.⁷

For de Beauvoir, patriarchal civilization is about the denial of men's mortality—of which women and nature are incessant reminders. Women's powers of procreation are distinguished from the powers of creation—the accomplishments through the vehicles of culture by which men achieve immortality. And yet this transcendence over women and nature can never be total: thus the ambivalence, the lack of self without other, the dependence of the self on the other both materially and emotionally. Thus develops a love-hate fetishization of women's bodies, which finds its ultimate manifestation in the sado-masochistic, pornographic displays of women as objects to be subdued, humiliated, and raped—the visual enactment of these fears and desires. (See Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, for a full development of the relationship between nature-hating, women-hating, and pornography.)⁸

An important contribution of de Beauvoir's work is to show that men seek to dominate women and nature for reasons that are not simply economic. They do so as well for psychological reasons that involve a denial of a part of themselves, as do other male culture-making activities. The process begins with beating the tenderness and empathy out of small boys and directing their natural human curiosity and joy in affecting the world around them into arrogant attitudes and destructive paths.

For men raised in woman-hating cultures, the fact that they are born of women and are dependent upon nonhuman nature for existence is frightening. The process of objectification, of the making of women and nature into "others" to be appropriated and dominated, is based on a profound forgetting by men. They forget that they were born of women, were dependent on women in their early helpless years, and are dependent on nonhuman nature all their lives, which allows first for objectification and then for domination. "The loss of memory is a transcendental condition for science. All objectification is a forgetting."⁹

But the denied part of men is never fully obliterated. The memory remains in the knowledge of mortality and the fear of women's power. A basic fragility of gender identity exists that surfaces when received truths about women and men are challenged and the sexes depart from their "natural" roles. Opposition to the not-very-radical Equal Rights Amendment can be partially explained on these grounds. More threatening are homosexuality and the gay liberation movement, because they name a more radical truth—that sexual orientation is not indelible, nor is it naturally heterosexual. Lesbianism, particularly, which suggests that women who possess this repudiated primordial power can be self-sufficient, reminds men that they may not be needed. Men are forced into remembering their own dependence on women to support and mediate the construction of their private reality and their public civilization. Again there is the need to repress memory and oppress women.

The recognition of the connections between women and nature and of woman's bridge-like position between nature and culture poses three possible directions for feminism. One direction is the integration of women into the world of culture and production by severing the woman-nature connection. Writes anthropologist Sherry Ortner, "Ultimately, both men and women can and must be equally involved in projects of creativity and transcendence. Only then will women be seen as aligned with culture, in culture's ongoing dialectic with nature."¹⁰ This position does not question nature-culture dualism itself, and it is the position taken by most socialist-feminists (see King, "Feminism and the Revolt of Nature")¹¹ and by de Beauvoir and Ortner, despite their

insights into the connections between women and nature. They see the severance of the woman-nature connection as a condition of women's liberation.

Other feminists have reinforced the woman-nature connection: woman and nature, the spiritual and intuitive, versus man and the culture of patriarchal rationality.¹² This position also does not necessarily question nature-culture dualism or recognize that women's ecological sensitivity and life orientation is a socialized perspective that could be socialized right out of us depending on our day-to-day lives. There is no reason to believe that women placed in positions of patriarchal power will act any differently from men, or that we can bring about a feminist revolution without consciously understanding history and without confronting the existing economic and political power structures.

Ecofeminism suggests a third direction: a recognition that although the nature-culture dualism is a product of culture, we can nonetheless *consciously choose* not to sever the woman-nature connection by joining male culture. Rather, we can use it as a vantage point for creating a different kind of culture and politics that would integrate intuitive, spiritual, and rational forms of knowledge, embracing both science and magic insofar as they enable us to transform the nature-culture distinction and to envision and create a free, ecological society.

Ecofeminism and the Intersection of Feminism and Ecology

The implications of a culture based on the devaluation of life-giving and the celebration of life-taking are profound for ecology and for women. This fact about our culture links the theories and politics of the ecology movement with those of the feminist movement. Adrienne Rich has written:

We have been perceived for too many centuries as pure Nature, exploited and raped like the earth and the solar system; small wonder if we now long to become Culture: pure spirit, mind. Yet it is precisely this culture and its political institutions which have split us off from itself. In so doing it has also split itself off from life, becoming the death culture of quantification, abstraction, and the will to power which has reached its most refined destructiveness in this century. It is this culture and politics of abstraction which women are talking of changing, of bringing into accountability in human terms.¹³

The way to ground a feminist critique of "this culture and politics of abstraction" is with a self-conscious ecological perspective that we apply to all theories and strategies, in the way that we are learning to apply race and class factors to every phase of feminist analysis.

Similarly, ecology requires a feminist perspective. Without a thorough feminist analysis of social domination that reveals the interconnected roots of misogyny and hatred of nature, ecology remains an abstraction: it is incomplete. If male ecological scientists and social ecologists fail to deal with misogyny—the deepest manifestation of nature-hating in their own lives—they are not living the ecological lives or creating the ecological society they claim.

The goals of harmonizing humanity and nonhuman nature, at both the experiential and theoretical levels, cannot be attained without the radical vision and understanding available from feminism. The twin concerns of ecofeminism—human liberation and our relationship to nonhuman nature—open the way to developing a set of ethics required for decision-making about technology. Technology signifies the tools that human beings use to interact with nature, including everything from the digging stick to nuclear bombs.

Ecofeminism also contributes an understanding of the connections between the domination of persons and the domination of nonhuman nature. Ecological science tells us that there is no hierarchy in nature itself, but rather a hierarchy in human society that is projected onto nature. Ecofeminism draws on feminist theory which asserts that the domination of woman was the original domination in human society, from which all other hierarchies—of rank, class, and political power—flow. Building on this unmasking of the ideology of a natural hierarchy of persons, ecofeminism uses its ecological perspective to develop the position that there is no hierarchy in nature: among persons, between persons and the rest of the natural world, or among the many forms of nonhuman nature. We live on the earth with millions of species, only one of which is the human species. Yet the human species in its patriarchal form is the only species which holds a conscious belief that it is entitled to dominion over the other species, and over the planet. Paradoxically, the human species is utterly dependent on nonhuman nature. We could not live without the rest of nature; it *could* live without us.

Ecofeminism draws on another basic principle of ecological science—unity in diversity—and develops it politically. Diversity in nature is necessary, and enriching. One of the major effects of industrial technology, capitalist or socialist, is environmental simplification. Many species are simply being wiped out, never to be seen on the earth again. In human society, commodity capitalism is intentionally simplifying human community and culture so that the same products can be marketed anywhere to anyone. The prospect is for all of us to be alike, with identical needs and desires, around the globe: Coca Cola in China, blue jeans in Russia, and American rock music virtually everywhere.

Few peoples of the earth have not had their lives touched and changed to some degree by the technology of industrialization. Ecofeminism as a social movement resists this social simplification through supporting the rich diversity of women the world over, and seeking a oneness in that diversity. Politically, ecofeminism opposes the ways that differences can separate women from each other, through the oppressions of class, privilege, sexuality, and race.

The special message of ecofeminism is that when women suffer through both social domination and the domination of nature, most of life on this planet suffers and is threatened as well. It is significant that feminism and ecology as social movements have emerged now, as nature's revolt against domination plays itself out in human history and in nonhuman nature at the same time. As we face slow environmental poisoning and the resulting environmental simplification, or the possible unleashing of our nuclear arsenals, we can hope that the prospect of the extinction of life on the planet will provide a universal impetus to social change. Ecofeminism supports utopian visions of harmonious, diverse, decentralized communities, using only those technologies based on ecological principles, as the only practical solution for the continuation of life on earth.

Visions and politics are joined as an ecofeminist culture and politics begin to emerge. Ecofeminists are taking direct action to effect changes that are immediate and personal as well as long-term and structural. Direct actions include learning holistic health and alternate ecological technologies, living in communities that explore old and new forms of spirituality which celebrate all life as diverse expressions of nature, considering the ecological consequences of our lifestyles and personal habits, and participating in creative public forms of resistance, including nonviolent civil disobedience.

Toward an Ecofeminist Praxis: Feminist Antimilitarism

Theory never converts simply or easily into practice: in fact, theory often lags behind practice, attempting to articulate the understanding behind things people are already doing. *Praxis* is the unity of thought and action, or theory and practice. Many of the women who founded the feminist antimilitarist movement in Europe and the United States share the ecofeminist perspective I have articulated. I believe that the movement as I will briefly describe it here grows out of such an understanding. For the last three years I have been personally involved in the ecofeminist antimilitarist movement, so the following is a first-hand account of one example of our praxis.

The connections between violence against women, a militarized culture, and the development and deployment of nuclear weapons have

long been evident to pacifist feminists.¹⁴ Ecofeminists like myself, whose concerns with all of life stem from an understanding of the connections between misogyny and the destruction of nature, began to see militarism and the death-courting weapons industry as the most immediate threat to continued life on the planet, while the ecological effects of other modern technologies pose a more long-term threat. In this manner militarism has become a central issue for most ecofeminists. Along with this development, many of us accepted the analysis of violence made by pacifist feminists and, therefore, began to see nonviolent direct action and resistance as the basis of our political practice.

The ecofeminist analysis of militarism is concerned with the militarization of culture and the economic priorities reflected by our enormous "defense" budgets and dwindling social services budgets. The level of weaponry and the militaristic economic priorities are products of patriarchal culture that speaks violence at every level. Our freedom and our lives are threatened, even if there is no war and none of the nuclear weapons are ever used. We have tried to make clear the particular ways that women suffer from war-making—as spoils to victorious armies, as refugees, as disabled and older women and single mothers who are dependent on dwindling social services. We connect the fear of nuclear annihilation with women's fear of male violence in our everyday lives.

For ecofeminists, military technology reflects a pervasive cultural and political situation. It is connected with rape, genocide, and imperialism, with starvation and homelessness, with the poisoning of the environment, and with the fearful lives of the world's peoples—especially those of women. Military and state power hierarchies join and reinforce each other through military technology. Particularly as shaped by ecofeminism, the feminist anti-militarist movement in the United States and Europe is a movement against a monstrously destructive technology and set of power relationships embodied in militarism.

Actions have been organized at the Pentagon in the United States and at military installations in Europe. The Women's Pentagon Action, originally conceived at an ecofeminist conference which I and others organized, has taken place at the Pentagon twice so far, on November 16 and 17, 1980, and November 15 and 16, 1981. It included about two thousand women the first year, and more than twice that the second. I took part in planning both actions and we took care to make the actions reflect *all* aspects of our politics. Intentionally there were no speakers, no leaders; the action sought to emphasize the connections between the military issue and other ecofeminist issues.

The themes of the Women's Pentagon Action have carried over into other actions our group has participated in, including those organized by others. At the June 12-14, 1982 disarmament demonstrations in New York City, the group's march contingent proclaimed the theme: "A feminist world is a nuclear free zone," the slogan hanging beneath a huge globe held aloft. Other banners told of visions for a feminist future, and members wore bibs that read "War is man-made," "Stop the violence in our lives," and "Disarm the patriarchy." There have been similar actions, drawing inspiration from the original Women's Pentagon Actions, elsewhere in the United States and in Europe. In California, the Bohemian Club, a male-only playground for corporate, government, and military elite, was the site of a demonstration by women who surrounded the club, enacting a life-affirming protest ritual (see Starhawk).¹⁵ In England on December 12, 1982, thirty thousand women surrounded a US military installation, weaving into the fence baby clothes, scarves, poems and other personal-life symbols. At one point, spontaneously, the word *freedom* rose from the lips of the women and was heard round and round the base. Three thousand women nonviolently blocked the entrances to the base on December 13 (see Fisher).¹⁶

The politics being created by these actions draw on women's culture: embodying what is best in women's life-oriented socialization, building on women's difference, organizing antihierarchically in small groups in visually and emotionally imaginative ways, and seeking an integration of issues.

These actions exemplify ecofeminism. While technocratic experts (including feminists) argue the merits and demerits of weapons systems, ecofeminism approaches the disarmament issues on an intimate and moral level. Ecofeminism holds that a personalized, decentralized life-affirming culture and politics of direct action are crucially needed to stop the arms race and transform the world's priorities. Because such weaponry does not exist apart from a contempt for women and all of nature, the issue of disarmament and threat of nuclear war is a feminist issue. It is the ultimate human issue, and the ultimate ecological issue. And so ecology, feminism, and liberation for all of nature, including ourselves, are joined.

Endnotes

1. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Seabury Press, New York, 1972, p. 248.
2. Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*, Cheshire Books, Palo Alto, 1982.
3. Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, W. W. Norton, New York, 1979, p. 248.

4. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, Harper & Row, New York, 1980.
5. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*, Seabury Press, New York, 1975.
6. Merchant, *op.cit.*
7. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Modern Library, Random House, New York, 1968, p. 144.
8. Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: "Culture's" Revenge against Nature*, Harper & Row, New York, 1981.
9. Horkheimer, *op.cit.*, p. 230.
10. Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" *Woman, Culture and Society*, Michele Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louis Lamphere, eds., Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1974, p. 87.
11. Ynestra King, "Feminism and The Revolt of Nature," *Heretica* 13: 12-16, Fall 1981.
12. Many such feminists call themselves ecofeminists. Some of them cite Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature* (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1978) as the source of their understanding of the deep connections between women and nature, and their politics. *Woman and Nature* is an inspirational poetic work with political implications. It explores the terrain of our deepest naturalness, but I do not read it as a delineation of a set of politics. To use Griffin's work in this way is to make it into something it was not intended to be. In personal conversation and in her more politically explicit works such as *Pornography and Silence* (1981), Griffin is antidualistic, struggling to bridge the false oppositions of nature and culture, passion and reason. Both science and poetry are deeply intuitive processes. Another work often cited by ecofeminists is Mary Daly's *Gyn/ecology* (1978). Daly, a theologian/philosopher, is also an inspirational thinker, but she is a genuinely dualistic thinker, reversing the "truths" of patriarchal theology. While I have learned a great deal from Daly, my perspective differs from hers in that I believe that any truly ecological politics, including ecological feminism, must be ultimately antidualistic.
13. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, W. W. Norton, New York, 1976, p. 285.
14. Barbara Deming, *We Cannot Live Without Our Lives*, Grossman, New York, 1974.
15. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1982, p. 168.
16. Berenice Fisher, "Women Ignite English Movement," *Womanews*, Feb. 1983.

Other Sources

- Daly, Mary. *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.
- Griffin, Susan. *Woman and Nature*. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.
- King, Ynestra. "All is Connectedness: Scenes from the Women's Pentagon Action USA." In *Keeping the Peace: A Women's Peace Handbook*, Lynne Jones, ed., London: The Women's Press, 1983.